

# Protecting the Past

## Councilwoman Lee Seeman seeks to preserve Jewish burial sites

By JAMES BERNSTEIN

When a monument is finally erected at what had been a forgotten, old, decaying Jewish cemetery in Serock, Poland, later this month, descendants of people buried there can thank a Long Island woman, Lee Seeman.

Seeman, 84, is a North Hempstead town councilwoman who juggles her municipal responsibilities with her work as one of 20 members of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. Seeman was appointed to the post in 1995 by President Bill Clinton.

The task of the commission, created by President Ronald Reagan in 1985, is to work with foreign gov-

ernments to preserve cultural heritage sites around the globe. A number of these sites are Jewish burial grounds in Eastern and Central Europe that were destroyed by the Nazis during World War II. The commission members are not paid.

In early October, Seeman delivered a lecture at the Great Neck Synagogue, explaining the commission's work and showing films and slides of monuments that had been erected at some sites. The lecture was sponsored by the family of the late Dr. Joseph Shein, a Great Neck physician for many years. His widow, Osnass, was in attendance.

When Seeman travels, she searches for old, neglected or destroyed Jewish burial sites. Her work also involves raising funds for the monuments and restoration of the cemeteries.

"People would say to me, 'Why are you spending money on the past?' " Seeman told the group at the synagogue. "I said no, these are our people. We have to have dedications to them."

Seeman said she believes a monument and restoration work at the burial site in Serock will be completed before the end of October. Each of the stones there will become part of a monument. Seeman added that she will travel to Serock in May for a dedication ceremony.

She was instrumental in the creation of a monument marking a cemetery in Wyszow, Poland, that was destroyed by the Nazis. She has worked on other sites in Estonia and



(Right): Councilwoman Lee Seeman (at right) with U.S. Ambassador to Latvia Judith Garber, at the restoration of the old Jewish cemetery in Riga, Latvia.

(Above): The Jewish cemetery in Serock, Poland, where, Seeman expects, a monument and restoration work will be completed by the end of the month.

Latvia. She has no plans to stop at any point soon.

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"There will be more" sites, Seeman said in an interview in her office at North Hempstead Town Hall, in Manhasset. "It all depends on how many are presented to me."

On one wall of her office, there is a color portrait of Franklin Delano

Roosevelt. Elsewhere in the

office, there are pictures of Seeman with Sen. Charles Schumer (D-New York), other officials and North Hempstead residents. Seeman is running for her third, four-year term. Her opponent is Republican Jeffrey Benjamin, a Great Neck lawyer. Seeman, who lives in Great Neck Estates, is a Democrat.

She worked in the first campaign to elect Clinton president. "I went out and got lots and lots of signatures for him," she said.

She wanted to do something in the Clinton administration, something that would focus on her Jewish heritage. "The commission sounded like the right thing," Seeman said.

Thus began her odyssey to help discover, restore and mark the burial sites first damaged by the Nazis and later by the Russians.

Former congressman Gary Ackerman, whose district included parts of Queens and Nassau counties, has worked with Seeman on the cause. Ackerman's mother and other ancestors once lived in Serock. Headstones in the cemetery there date back as far as 1524. Ackerman said in a statement that he is honored Seeman is working on a restoration project there.

Ron Cooper, the mayor of Lake Success, has also gotten involved.

A few years ago, Cooper and his wife were on a tour of the Baltic States and Russia. They traveled to Panevezys, Lithuania, where Cooper's father had come from. The Coopers asked to see the local cemetery.

"The Soviets took away the headstones and used them for construction material," Cooper said. "I was aghast. Jewish cemeteries are sacred ground and I believe some of my relatives are buried there. I was angry."



Cooper has decided to donate \$5,000 to an effort to have a monument placed at the burial site.

Of the commission's 20 members, three, including Seeman, are from New York. The two others are Jules Fleischer of Brooklyn and Jonathan Rikoon of Far Rockaway.

"In order to protect the memory of the Holocaust, we have not only preserved and protected physical sites, we have touched the hearts and minds of thousands of Central and Eastern Europeans and citizens of the former Soviet Union," commission chairman Warren L. Miller said in a statement.

"By maintaining a brisk pace of diplomacy we have concluded 19 bilateral agreements to preserve America's heritage abroad since I became chairman in June 2001. Additional agreements are being sought," Miller said.

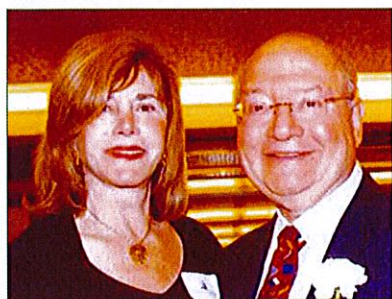
The commission's work has been widespread. In Estonia, for example, the commission, in partnership with the British Holocaust Educational Trust, has funded eight memorials at sites of German forced labor camps.

In Germany, the commission worked at the Little Camp at Buchenwald, which is separated by only a barbed wire fence from the Main Camp.


Prisoners at the Little Camp were subjected to the greatest suffering of all those at Buchenwald, according to a dedication plaque erected by Miller, who was then a commission member. The memorial was erected in partnership with the Federal Republic of Germany and Germany's Free State of Thuringia.

Seeman is committed to continuing her work on the commission.

"One of the most important things I can do in my life is preserve Jewish heritage," she said.



Seeman with former Congressman Gary Ackerman, who has worked with her on the cemetery restoration cause.

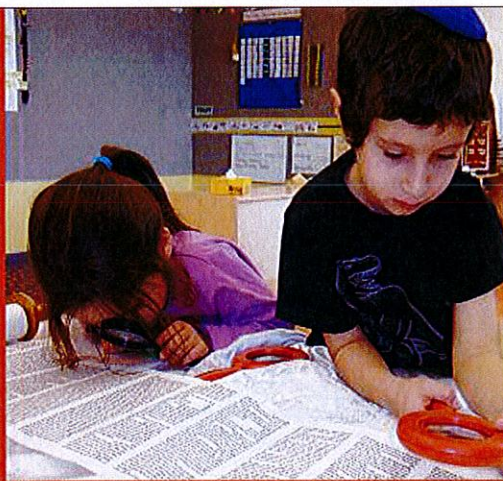


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